

Research confirms wisdom of Santa's wish lists, showing holiday shoppers often don't buy what recipients want

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The gift-giving season is here and research from West Virginia University expert Julian Givi sheds light on what recipients really want. He's also discovered common mismatches between giver and recipient that give way to potential dissatisfaction for both. Credit: West Virginia University

Givers frequently struggle when it comes to choosing presents recipients really want, according to Julian Givi, a West Virginia University expert

on gifting.

"I always assumed people give to make recipients happy," Givi said. "But that's not the case. When we give gifts, we want to make the recipient happy and we want to make ourselves happy. The gift has to accomplish two goals that sometimes contrast, because givers and recipients often want different things out of a gift."

Givi's newly published and forthcoming scholarship on gift-giving includes papers in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* and *European Journal of Marketing* that present the results of his original studies; as well as an overarching summary and analysis of gifting research in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, which spans disciplines from sociology to psychology to management.

Givi, an assistant professor of marketing at the John Chambers College of Business and Economics, has uncovered various mismatches between giver and recipient. For instance, recipients welcome sentimental presents like handwritten notes or photographs, he said, or unconventional gifts like an e-reader for Valentine's Day, but they won't get those from most givers, who see too much risk that these gifts will miss the mark.

Givi has also discovered that givers focus on the gratifying moment when the bow comes off, the fun present is revealed and the smile lights up, while recipients want practical gifts they can use for a long time.

In one recent study, Givi investigated the stress people feel around holiday shopping, focusing on givers' anxiety about how recipients will rate their gifts against the givers' equivalent possessions: how they'll feel about getting standard Beats headphones when the giver owns noise-canceling Beats or about getting a four-quart air fryer when the giver owns a six-quart version.

To unpack this obsession with measuring what we give against what we own, Givi enlisted several hundred study participants to enact scenarios that involved deciding whether to purchase gifts that compared unfavorably to things recipients knew the givers owned.

Playing the roles of friends, co-workers or romantic partners, participants imagined buying or receiving presents ranging from mug warmers to event tickets. The study's results showed givers consistently overestimated how offended recipients would be to receive an inferior—older, cheaper, less highly rated or less fully featured—version of an item they knew the giver had.

Although recipients weren't concerned about those disparities, givers were so worried about them that, to avoid offending recipients, they'd keep shopping, go over budget or even give a gift they knew the recipient wouldn't like as much as the "inferior" option.

In a separate study, Givi examined givers' unwillingness to buy presents they'd never buy for themselves—specifically, presents that conflict with the givers' attitudes and beliefs.

"This research relates to gifts people feel really charged about—a vegetarian thinking about giving a [gift card](#) to a steakhouse, a sports fan considering buying the jersey of a hated rival team or a gun opponent looking at firearms paraphernalia, rather than someone who just dislikes country music buying a country music encyclopedia as a gift," he explained.

The study showed givers strongly resist bending their attitudes to give these sorts of gifts, even knowing how much they'd be appreciated. Instead, givers will use their budgets on presents they know are relatively undesirable, amounting to inefficient spending that could damage relationships.

Other takeaways pertain to stores rather than shoppers.

"Imagine I'm a bookseller," Givi suggested. "During the [holiday shopping](#) season, I should think twice about promoting books that would be attitude-inconsistent for a considerable segment of givers—say, a Trump or Obama autobiography. Because that segment is unlikely to buy those books even if I promote them, I should promote books that won't be attitude-inconsistent for anyone, such as a Mr. Rogers autobiography.

"When retailers know what recipients want, they can lower gift returns. When marketers know what givers like and don't like to give, they can be more efficient with their advertising dollars."

Givi knows that gifting affects consumers, retailers and the overall economy. According to national data, November-December [holiday sales](#) have averaged almost 20% of total [retail sales](#) over the past five years, with last year's holiday sales up 13.5% over 2020 and this year's expected to grow another 6-8%.

"Unlike many other occasions, holidays usually involve shopping for multiple recipients, and that can be stressful," Givi said.

For givers not feeling cheerful this season, he recommends, above all, listening to what recipients say.

"Often we know exactly what the recipient wants yet we avoid those gifts because they're not what we want to give. They might be boring. They might not be a surprise."

But the data is clear: "When you know what someone wants, go ahead and give it," Givi said.

He also suggested focusing on the time after the gift exchange: "Don't

worry about the moment the gift is opened—think about the weeks and months during which the recipient will own the gift."

And he advised not worrying too much. "Remember, gifts are about joy and happiness. If someone doesn't love their gift this holiday, you can always try again soon with a gift for no particular occasion.

"Even though we buy most gifts for occasions like Christmas, the research shows it's far easier to make [recipients](#) happy with [gifts](#) that are 'just because.'"

More information: Julian Givi et al, Givers eschew gifts that are inferior to their own: How social norms, regulatory focus, and concerns about offending lead givers astray, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1302](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1302)

Julian Givi et al, Your gift, but my attitude: gift-givers' aversion to attitude-inconsistent gifts, *European Journal of Marketing* (2022). [DOI: 10.1108/EJM-02-2021-0075](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-02-2021-0075)

Julian Givi et al, An integrative review of gift-giving research in consumer behavior and marketing, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1318](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1318)

Provided by West Virginia University

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